

# The Arch of Germanicus in Rome

Matthew Nicholls

Rome's many victory monuments are confident statements of conquest and triumph. But do any offer a more nuanced message? Matthew Nicholls rebuilds one lost arch to find out.

Among the best known monuments of victory in Rome are triumphal arches, monumental reminders of the Roman military parades, triumphs, that had once passed the spots they stood on. Authors like Livy tell us about such victory arches, now long vanished, dating back as far as the 190s B.C., honouring the generals of the Republic. After the Republic gave way to rule by emperors, only imperial family members were allowed to be honoured by such impressive monuments; the surviving triumphal arches in Rome all honour emperors – Titus, Septimius Severus, and Constantine.

One particularly interesting example, though, is a triumphal arch erected to a man who never became emperor. Trying to reconstruct this arch as a small part of my digital model of ancient Rome was an interesting task, both because of the nature of the evidence we can piece together, and

also because of what the resulting reconstruction might help to show. Here I suggest that this arch's meaning within the ancient city might carry some subtly mixed messages, and that these perhaps – if you choose to read them this way – fit with our picture of the emperor Tiberius as a jealous and somewhat hypocritical man.

## Snatching victory from defeat

First, a little background on the arch's honorand, Germanicus. October 2019 will mark the 2000th anniversary of the death of this dashing Roman imperial prince. He earned enormous popularity for a series of campaigns avenging the terrible defeat by German tribes of three Roman legions under governor Varus in A.D. 9, a disaster that had traumatised the elderly emperor

Augustus and perhaps contributed to a shift in Rome's 'foreign policy' from endless expansion to retrenchment behind natural borders, in this case the river Rhine. After Augustus' death, Germanicus (aged 24) was sent out to settle the area and its legionaries, who were threatening mutiny, by the new emperor, his uncle Tiberius. He recovered the lost legionary eagles and returned in A.D. 15 to the site of the Varus disaster to bury the Roman dead. Tacitus describes his battlefield tour with grim relish:

*... they visited the mournful sites, ghastly in their appearance and associations ... In the centre of the field were whitening bones, scattered or gathered together as men had fled or stood to resist. Nearby fragments of weapons and limbs of horses were lying about, and also, nailed to trunks of trees, were heads. In the adjacent groves were the barbarous altars, on which they had sacrificed the tribunes and first-rank centurions ... here the legates*



*The Circus Flaminius in Matthew Nicholls' digital reconstruction of ancient Rome. The Arch of Germanicus is ahead, with the Theatre of Marcellus to the right and the Porticus Octaviae to the left.*



*fell, there the eagles were captured; where Varus was first wounded, where he found his end by the blow of his own ill-fated right hand... (Tacitus Annals 1.61).*

This partial recovery of Roman honour made Germanicus popular at home and, more worryingly perhaps for Tiberius, popular with the powerful German legions. The elderly Augustus had tried to bring Germanicus into the line of succession – he was married to the emperor's granddaughter and had numerous children by her – and this made him a threat to Augustus' eventual heir Tiberius, who had come to power in A.D. 14 in late middle age, unable to compete with Germanicus' youthful verve and reputation.

### A jealous emperor?

At this point, so the story goes, Germanicus was poised to invade and conquer new German territory, but the emperor Tiberius instead recalled him to Rome and sent him off to a special command in the eastern empire. Tacitus claims that Tiberius acted out of jealousy, particularly of Germanicus' popularity with the people and the troops. Suspicions deepened when Germanicus suddenly died in mysterious circumstances in Syria, with Tiberius implicated in his possible murder. We might be a little sceptical of the extent of Tiberius' guilt, and of Tacitus' ability to discern his motives (he was writing a hundred years after the event, and was always ready to see jealousy, hypocrisy, and intrigue), but we can at least be confident that Germanicus' postings were connected to dynastic power politics back in Rome.

This brings us back to the city of Rome's growing repertoire of victory monuments. There was a universal public demand for the commemoration of the

popular Germanicus, cut off in his prime. This had the potential to embarrass Tiberius, given the circumstances. We might compare the aftermath of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, when the British public demanded the commemoration of a princess who had fallen out of favour with the establishment.

Could Tiberius find a way out of this dilemma? This was not straightforward. As we have seen, Tiberius was widely regarded as jealous of Germanicus or even complicit in his death, and Germanicus' victories, while popular, were not exactly the conventional stuff of triumphal monuments – they were really exercises in damage limitation, trying to undo the calamity of the Varus disaster and preventing Rome's German legions from mutiny. What sort of commemoration would strike the right note?

### Set in stone: the commemorating of Germanicus

Tacitus tells us that the Senate and other groups at Rome approved a range of

posthumous honours for Germanicus, including commemorative arches in Rome and around the empire,

*with an inscription recording his achievements, and how he had died in the public service.*

These decisions of the Senate were themselves recorded on bronze inscriptions and sent round the empire as a further testimony of Germanicus' legacy (and, we might think, of Tiberius' frantic attempts to show how fond of Germanicus he had really been all along). By great good fortune, some of these bronze inscriptions survive including the *Tabula Siarensis*, a pair of large bronze fragments discovered in 1982 at ancient Siarum in Spain. The detailed description that they preserve of the proposed Arch of Germanicus at Rome offers us one of those nice corners of Roman history where literary testimony (Tacitus), epigraphy (the study of inscriptions), and archaeology can be combined:

*The Senate determined that a marble arch should be erected in the Circus Flaminius . . . placed near [or 'facing'] statues to Divus Augustus and to the Augustan house . . . on the face of this arch, 'The Senate and Roman people have dedicated this monument... to the memory of Germanicus Caesar, since he, having defeated the Germans in war . . . having recovered the military standards, having avenged a treacherous defeat of an army of the Roman people, having put the status of the Gauls in order, as proconsul sent to the overseas provinces to organize them and the kingdoms of the region in accordance with the instructions of Tiberius Caesar Augustus . . . sparing himself no effort . . . he died serving the res publica.' And on top of this arch a statue of Germanicus Caesar should be placed, in a triumphal chariot, and, beside this,*







statues of Drusus Germanicus, his father and the brother by birth of Tiberius Caesar Augustus, and of Antonia, his mother, . . . and of Livia, his sister, and of Tiberius Germanicus, his brother, and of his sons and daughters ... (*Tabula Siarensis*, 9–21).

We can think about the spin that this account puts on the events in Germany. Here Germanicus has ‘avenged’ a ‘treacherous defeat’ (as opposed to mopping up the aftermath of some disastrous bungling by Varus, and heading off a mutiny by unpaid and angry Roman troops). Germanicus is also tied very closely to the imperial family, whose statues flank his own, and is explicitly said to have been acting on Tiberius’ orders: is Tiberius attempting to control his legacy and allow his lustre to reflect back on the dynasty, perhaps trying to head off the threat of a rival faction based around Germanicus’ family? Germanicus’ children were also Augustus’ great-grandchildren, potential rivals to Tiberius’ chosen heirs – and in fact Germanicus’ son and grandson did become emperors.

The *Tabula Siarensis* gives us enough information to attempt a visual reconstruction of the arch, and also tells us where it was located – the Circus Flaminius, an area that had been magnificently rebuilt under Augustus, with a new theatre, temples, and porticoes around a large paved square. A later ancient marble map of Rome shows the foundations of an arch here which are a good fit for Germanicus’ monument. This information about the size, orientation, and shape

of the arch can be combined with what the *Tabula Siarensis* tells us about its inscription and statue decoration to arrive at the reconstruction shown here.

What does this arch tell us about the way Germanicus was commemorated? Note that standing in this position, it effectively closes off the southern end of the Circus Flaminius. Any movement through this area now has to pass through it, or by it (this fits with how the *Tabula Siarensis* chooses to call it a *ianus*, a gateway, rather than an *arcus* or *fornix*). Since the route of the Roman triumphal procession runs through this area, this traffic includes all future triumphant generals. The Capitoline Hill, the eventual destination of the triumph, is visible right ahead.

### Arch rival?

So far, so good: this arch stands at a prominent point, surrounded by new imperial monuments and right on the route of the triumph. Germanicus could hardly have complained. But its location might be ‘read’ in another way, with sadder associations that suggest Tiberius may have been trying to limit the splendour of Germanicus’ monument. We can see that the arch stands between two other imperial family monuments. One is the Theatre of Marcellus, named for a nephew of Augustus who had been marked out as heir, died prematurely in 23 B.C., and was widely mourned: the Germanicus of his day. The other, to the left in these images, is the Porticus Octaviae, a porticoed square enclosing two older temples, built by Augustus some time after 27 B.C. and

named after Marcellus’ mother, Augustus’ sister Octavia. Augustus’ lack of children put some pressure on Octavia to provide heirs, but this never quite worked out. Marcellus, the son of her first marriage, died, and the children of her second marriage to Marc Antony (one of whom was Germanicus’ mother) were sidelined from the succession when Marc Antony abandoned her and took up with Cleopatra. This corner of Rome, with its statues of the imperial family and monuments dedicated to the troubled line of Augustus’ sister, might be thought to have developed a resonance of failed attempts to extend the family line – of early promise snuffed out.

By putting Germanicus’ arch in this location, prominent and honourable as it was, Tiberius could perhaps have been subtly marking him as an also-ran, a slight masked with a noisy outward show of honour. This fits – too neatly? – with the Tiberius we think we know from Tacitus (jealous, brooding, hypocritical, prone to nurse a grudge). The arch is just on the edge of the Campus Martius, still at this date an area of parkland, theatres, temples, tombs, and baths. The real working centre of Rome’s power – the Forum, the Capitoline – lay beyond, forever just out of Germanicus’ ‘reach’ as successive generations of imperial *triumphatores* passed by.

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